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THE ITEL'MENS

V. V. ANTROPOVA

General Information

178 The ancient population of Kamchatka—the Itel'mens—have preserved their language and sense of ethnic identity only in a few villages of the southern part of the Tigil'skiy Rayon of the Koryak National Okrug. By language, the Itel'mens belong, together with the Chukchi and Koryaks, to the northeastern group of paleo-Asiatic peoples. The census of 1926–27 set
161 the number of Itel'mens at 814.

101 The term Itel'men means "resident," "living man." In the documents and literature of the 18th century and later, the Itel'mens were called Kamchadals.

With the exception of the residents of a few villages, the descendants of the Itel'mens have completely merged with the Russians. Officially, they are considered Russians, but the term "Kamchadals" is still used in colloquial speech. However, it is applied not only to the Russified descendants of the Itel'mens, but also to the descendants of Russian Cossacks and peasants settled in Kamchatka in the 18th century. Before the Revolution, these component elements of the Kamchadals belonged to different social classes (Russ. "sosloviya"), but in everything else the Russian-speaking Kamchadals constituted a homogeneous group.

The nearest neighbors of the Itel'mens—the reindeer Koryaks—called them by the same name as the coastal Koryaks: Nymylyn, or "village resident." In the 18th century, the reindeer Koryaks called the Itel'mens Khonchalo, from which some students trace the origin of "Kamchatka" and "Kamchadal."

In the early 18th century, the Itel'mens were scattered virtually over the entire peninsula, from its southern tip to 58° N, interspersed in the north with the Koryaks. The largest concentration was in the valley of the Kamchatka River. At that time, a distinct group of Itel'mens, called "Near Kurilers," lived on Cape Lopatka and the first islands of the Kurile group. This group lived in direct contact with the Ainu (Kurilers) and assimilated with them to a large extent. In physical type, language and certain features of their way of life, the "Near Kurilers" were somewhat different from either the Ainu or the Itel'mens.

197 In the past, the Itel'mens were divided, according to language, into
619 northern, southern and western. The former consisted of Itel'mens living along the Kamchatka River and the east coast, from the village of Uka in the

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north to the Nalachevaya River in the south. The second included Itel'mens living from the Nalachevaya River to Cape Lopatka, as well as the "Near Kurilers." The third group consisted of the Itel'mens of the western coast of the Kamchatka Peninsula (Sedanka-Khayryuzovo). The greatest differences were between the languages of the northern and southern groups. Of the dialects of the Itel'men language, only two have survived to our time—the Khayruyuzovo and the Sedanka, which were strongly affected by Koryak and Russian.

The question of the origin of the Itel'mens remains open. The archeological remains on the peninsula have not been studied sufficiently. They are represented by semiunderground dwellings, which hold large quantities of neolithic stone implements: arrowheads, spears, hatchets, scrapers, blubber lamps, well-made bone objects and fragments of pottery. These are very close to the Itel'men implements of the 17th and 18th centuries. Similar stone and bone objects were found by the first explorers of Kamchatka—S. Krasheninnikov (1737–1742) and G. Steller (1740–44).

The first ethnographic data about the Itel'mens were provided by V. Atlasov, who made a journey to Kamchatka from the Anadyr' Fort in 1697, with a detachment of Cossacks and Yukagirs. Atlasov followed the western coast, almost to the southern tip of the peninsula, and collected the first fur-tax from the Itel'mens. He found the Itel'mens at the height of the neolithic technique in making stone and bone implements. His "tales" (reports) abound in ethnographic materials. They provide fairly detailed descriptions of the material culture (villages, dwellings, clothing, methods of preparing food, etc.), the geographic distribution, and individual features of clan organization. Especially interesting are Atlasov's data on pottery-making, for only 40 years later, S. Krasheninnikov found no traces of this occupation among the Itel'mens.

Economy, Daily Life and Social Relations

Thanks to the remarkable work of Stepan Krasheninnikov, a participant in Bering's Second Kamchatka Expedition, we have a detailed account of the material production and social order of the Itel'mens in the first half of the 18th century, when they still retained their original culture.

They were fishermen who lived in permanent settlements along rivers. Their largest concentration was in the basin of the Kamchatka River. The main fishing season was during the salmon-run, when the fish surged upstream in dense masses to spawn. They fished with nets and hooks.

Nets were woven of nettle fiber. Fish was cured, made into yukola, and pickled in pits. Fish-heads were always pickled; this was a favorite dish.

The second important occupation of the Itel'mens was hunting. Kamchatka at that time was very rich in meat and fur animals. But fur animals were also hunted primarily for meat, since there was no market for the furs. V. Atlasov reported that the Itel'mens mixed chopped sable tails with the clay when making clay utensils.

An important role in the Itel'men economy was played by sea hunting. They hunted seal, fur-seal, and sea-beaver. The southern Itel'mens also hunted whales with arrows poisoned with plant poison.

None of the northern Siberian peoples engaged as widely as the Itel'mens in gathering wild plants. Most important in their diet were the tubers of sarana (a local name for various members of the lily family), sweet grass stems, the leaves of arnica, various berries, cedar nuts, etc. Plant tubers were dug out with a special digging implement of deer horn, tied to a wooden

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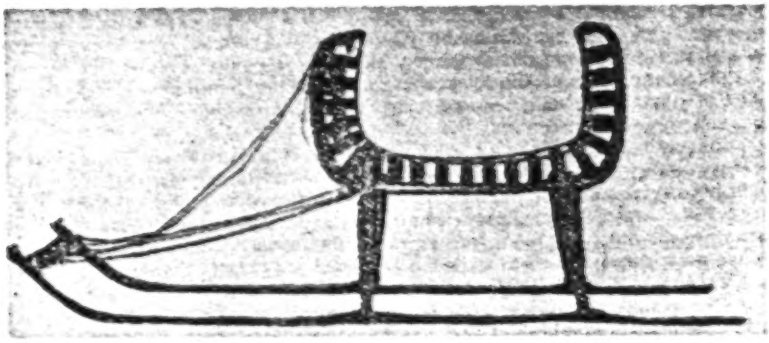

18th-century dogsled.

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handle. Later the horn was replaced by an iron tip. Gathering plants was women's work. Fishing and hunting were men's occupations, but the preserving of fish was in the woman's domain, as were the spinning of thread for the nets from nettle, the weaving of mats, and sewing of clothes. Krasheninnikov reports that preparing food, tending the dogs and all carpentry work were done by men.

The Russians found among the Itel'mens a highly developed neolithic technology. "The former Kamchatka metals, almost until the coming of the Russians, were bone and stones. They were used in the making of axes, knives, spears, arrows, lancets and needles," Krasheninnikov writes about the Itel'mens. Rock crystal was also widely used for knives and tips. Fire was made with a wooden drill. Food, mainly fish and meat, was cooked even in the early 18th century in wooden troughs, into which red-hot stones were thrown.

The only domesticated animal of the Itel'mens was the dog. Later, harness dog-breeding of the so-called Eastern Siberian type developed in Kamchatka. However, until the middle of the 19th century, the Itel'mens used their ancient sled with two pairs of arched staves and a saddle-like seat. At the time of Krasheninnikov's visit, the Itel'mens had gliding skis, but used mostly woven snowshoes. River navigation was by bat—narrow boats, hollowed out of whole poplar trunks. For stability and greater carrying capacity, two of these boats were sometimes tied together and covered to make a platform. Krasheninnikov reports that it took the Itel'mens three years to make a bat with a stone adze.

The Russians called the Itel'men villages in the 18th century ostrozhkas, or "little forts." They were situated along river banks and consisted of winter and summer dwellings. The winter dwelling was a semiunderground yurt, as it was then called by the Russians, with an entrance through the smoke-opening in the roof. The dwelling also had a side exit, but this was used only by women and children. The summer dwelling of the individual family was the so-called balagan—a pyramidal, grass-covered tent set on high platforms resting on piles. The ancient dress of the Itel'mens resembled Koryak and Chukchi dress.

Such, in its general features, was the material culture of the Itel'mens in the beginning of the 18th century. Analogous to the low level of material production were the primitive forms of social relations.

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Village, 18th-century engraving.

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At the time of the first Russian acquaintance with Kamchatka the Itel'mens maintained a primitive-communal order. "Until its subjection to Russian rule," wrote Krasheninnikov, "this wild people lived in a state of complete freedom; it had no masters, was subjected to no laws, and paid tribute to no one. Old and courageous people had superior position in every ostroshka, but this meant only that their advice was hearkened to. Generally, there was equality among them, no one could issue commands to anyone else, and no one had the right to mete out punishment on his own to anyone." Every village was inhabited by members of one clan. The semidugout housed several related families; the number of its inhabitants sometimes was as high as 100. They were bound by collective production and consumption. The custom of vendetta prevailed.

The woman held a high position in family and social life. Many features of matriarchy persisted in the Itel'men social system. These included the husband's moving into the wife's home, or at least temporary residence in the father-in-law's house; marriage by working for the bride, which involved the groom's moving to her home and performing various tasks. But the matriarchal organization was already in a state of disintegration in the beginning of the 18th century. Constant wars among individual clans and with neighboring peoples, waged for the sake of seizing women and captives, who were partially turned into slaves, intensified this process. The arrival of Russians in Kamchatka led to rapid changes in the economy and life of the Itel'mens.

The religious notions of the Itel'mens, according to 18th-century explorers, and primarily Krasheninnikov, had many elements in common with the beliefs of the Koryaks and Chukchi. These included the idea of the raven-creator, rituals and celebrations connected with the annual economic cycle, whale, bear and other ceremonials, consisting of "treating" and "giving gifts" to the animals killed in the hunt. The most important of these was the fall festival, ending in "purification"—passing through hoops of birch twigs. The Itel'mens believed in evil mountain and forest

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105 The Itel'mens believed in evil mountain and forest
[1796] spirits, the sea-spirit, Mitg, good protecting spirits, etc. Anthropomorphic images of the spirits were usually made of wood.

[1793] The central figure of Itel'men mythology was the raven-creator, Kutkh. But he was not held in esteem, and various comical and obscene stories were told about him.

[764] The bodies of dead adults were given to the dogs to eat; children were
[756] buried in hollow trees. The Itel'men shamans did not have any special clothing or tambourines.

[799] In the middle of the 18th century, the Itel'mens were converted to Christianity, but they continued to cling to their animistic ideas.

Information about the abundance of fur on Kamchatka received from Luka
175 Morozko and Atlasov attracted the attention of the tsarist government and
648 the Yakutiyan governors.

A special official—a prikashchik—was appointed to collect taxes. The Kamchatka prikashchiks, who were virtually the full masters of the peninsula, often abused their power. In addition to the fur-tax, they exacted from the population great quantities of furs for their own enrichment. The predatory extermination of fur animals, and most of all, sable, sharply reduced the catch, and the Itel'mens were often unable to pay the tax in full. The arbitrary extortion of cured fish, "sweet grass" for wine-making, lily tubers, berries, cedar nuts, seal blubber, skins, and even sleds, boats and clothing, for the benefit of the tax collectors became systematic. In addition to all this, the natives suffered from exploitative trading and its consequences—debt slavery.

175 The Itel'mens' struggle against extortions and oppression expressed
648 itself at first in attacks on individual representatives of the tsarist govern-
669 ment and raids on the tax treasury. Large uprisings broke out in 1706, 1711 and 1731.

The rebellion of 1731 involved nearly all the Itel'mens. After its suppression, a special "investigating office" was sent to the area to look into its causes. The leaders of the rebellion were executed. Some of the officials were also punished.

[161] The quelling of rebellions by armed force and the arbitrary rule of the
[731] local officials reduced the Itel'men population. But the principal reason for the population decline was the epidemics of smallpox, typhus and other
[614] diseases which devastated entire districts. The remnants of the various
[178] clans could no longer exist independently and united into larger territorial units. Thus, instead of the former clan villages, new settlements sprang
[728] up, inhabited by members of various clans. New villages were also created by compulsory resettlement. Thus, after the rebellion of 1731, the inhabitants of the village of Klyuchi were resettled in Kozyrevsk; the inhabitants of Nachiki were moved there from the western coast of the peninsula.

175 The system of tax collection through the village elders and the develop-
648 ment of barter with Russians resulted in the accumulation of private prop-
556 erty in the hands of some individuals. As early as the 1730's, there were
426 toyons (elders) who lent sables to their kinsmen to enable them to pay their tribute, in exchange for subsequent work.

The economic condition of the Itel'mens did not improve in the latter half
175 of the 18th century. This was due above all to the system of tax collection
648 and the tyranny of the local authorities. Taxes were collected, not from the present population, but according to lists, which included men long dead. The living thus had to pay taxes for dead relatives. Extremely onerous, too,
[466] was the imposition of the duty to transport numerous officials, as well as cargo, without compensation all over the peninsula. This took the men away from their occupations and condemned them to frequent periods of famine.

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View of the village of Sedanka, early 20th century.

The development of trade gave rise to the exploitation of the Itel'mens by merchants. These gave the Itel'mens goods on credit, often against their will; then, if the debt was not paid in time, they doubled or tripled the sum. Often, an Itel'men would have to pay as long as he lived for some small article, such as a knife. This type of trade did not disappear even after the formation of the Russo-American Company (1799). The company sold its wares at prices 10 times higher than their actual value. By the 1860's, the indebtedness of the Itel'mens to this company had risen to the grandiose sum of 150,000 rubles. 195 439 426

The Itel'men economy remained essentially subsistence. The fishing catch went solely for the satisfaction of the fishermen's needs, and none of it was sold. The only articles that had commodity value were furs. Villages were governed by elders, elected by the villagers and approved by the Russian administration. Very often the post of elder was hereditary. Survivals of clan organization were preserved among the Itel'mens until the 20th century. These included elements of collective production and distribution of food products—collective fishing by means of fishtraps, collective seal hunting, division of the carcass of a whale cast up on the shore, the custom of mutual aid, etc. 195 [433] [622] [648] [178] [614] [476]

The first efforts at introducing agriculture were made after the founding of a monastery (the Uspenskaya Pustyn') on Kamchatka, in the first quarter of the 18th century. In the 1740's the first group of Russian peasants was resettled in Kamchatka. Further groups of settlers followed, but agriculture enjoyed small success. The administrative method of introducing agriculture among the Itel'mens could yield no appreciable results with the primitive agricultural techniques of that time. The products of agriculture therefore held a small place in Itel'men economy. Gardening was more successful. In the second half of the 19th century, all Itel'men villages had small gardens, producing potatoes, turnips and horse-radish. But even this gardening was negligible in scope and extremely primitive. The natives were unskilled in tending plants; they dug the soil with wooden hoes, did not know about watering, and so on. 195 648 241 [792]

Cattle were first brought to Kamchatka in 1733, and again, from time to time, in succeeding years. The livestock was kept grazing all year; there was little preparation of hay. Horses were also left to their own devices, and became so wild that they were difficult to catch. They were used chiefly in autumn as riding and pack animals. Wheel transport, such as the cart, 195 648 231

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Medical aerosleigh.

wheel transport such as the cart, was unknown before the Revolution. For cattle, the Rel'mens built cold barns or sheds and provided some supplementary fodder in winter. However, the milk yield was very low, and livestock mortality was high.

From the Russians, the Rel'mens obtained improved means of production: firearms, nets, etc. Stone and bone implements were completely abandoned in favor of metal ones. Russian clothing and utensils began to come into use. The primitive semidugout was gradually (and by the beginning of the 19th century, completely) replaced by wooden board dwellings, and occasionally by log houses of the Russian type. Simultaneously with the absorption of Russian culture by the Rel'mens, a reverse process was also taking place in the 18th and 19th centuries. Soldiers, Cossacks and peasants, who were systematically being resettled on the peninsula after the middle of the 18th century, married Rel'men women and acquired some elements of their way of life and culture. The result was that peculiar population of the peninsula which became known, as we have pointed out earlier, under the name of Kamchadals and was often mistakenly classified as Rel'men.

In the early 20th century, the condition of the Rel'mens deteriorated in consequence of the development of the Japanese capitalist fishing industry in Kamchatka. Predatory industrial fishing at the mouths of rivers during spawning runs caused almost annual failures of the native catch and led to inevitable famines.

Contemporary Life of the Itel'mens

During the civil war in the Far East, the Rel'mens actively helped the guerrilla units, and later the Red Army troops, in liquidating the White bands. The guerrilla units included many residents of the villages of Napana, Utkholok, Kovran and Sedanka. In 1921, the Soviet government was firmly established on the peninsula, and the reconstruction of the economy was launched.

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At present, the Itel'mens differ little in economy, culture and life from the neighboring Russian population of Kamchatka. They are united in fishing collectives which are well equipped with technical gear. A certain role in the Itel'men collectives is also played by sea hunting and the hunting of fur animals.

The land area devoted to gardening is growing yearly. Potatoes are grown everywhere in sufficient quantity to provide food until the next crop. The collectives have ploughs, harrows, haying-machines, and other agricultural implements. The ploughing is now done with horses. The stocks of cattle are gradually being improved; the preparation of hay is widely practiced, and warm barns have been built for the livestock. Some of the collectives, like the "Red Partisan," not only produce enough milk for their own needs, but also supply the workers and employees of the Tigil'skiy Rayon.

Today, Itel'men collective-farm members live in houses of the Russian type—spacious, bright, with large glass windows and plastered walls. The house furnishings are the same as those of the Russian collective-farm members.

In all the Itel'men villages there are medical institutions, clubs and schools. The instruction is in Russian, since all Itel'mens know Russian as well as their native language. Various institutions are staffed with native personnel. Dozens of Itel'mens, both men and women, are working as teachers, accountants, and nurses in hospitals, and are also serving in elective Party and Soviet posts.

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